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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000355

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SUBJECT: MAYORAL CANDIDATES GUARDED IN AMBASSADOR'S CALLS  
  
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Classified By: Ambassador Marie L. Yovanovitch. Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On May 14-15 the Ambassador met separately with two ruling coalition mayoral candidates: Prosperous Armenia (PA) candidate (and Health Minister) Harutyun Kushkian, and Rule of Law (OY) candidate and parliamentary faction leader Heghine Bisharian. Kushkian said his party and its senior Republican Party of Armenia (PRA) partner in the ruling coalition decided on separate campaigns in order to gauge their respective levels of support in society. Bisharian said that while her party took a hit in popularity following its decision to join the coalition in 2008, she sees the party's popularity rising as it has kept the promises it made to its electorate. The Ambassador used the meetings to convey her dismay over the spate of election-related violence directed at the media and opposition canvassers, as well as the violence between activists of coalition partners Republican (RPA) and Prosperous Armenia (PA).. END SUMMARY

PROSPEROUS ARMENIA  
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¶2. (C) Ambassador called on Health Minister Harutyun Kushkian in his offices at the Health Ministry on April 14. Though cordial, Kushkian gave little away, with the entire conversation lasting less than half an hour. Two points were most telling amidst Kushkian's brief non-answers. The first was his comment that he did not consider such issues as garbage disposal, water supply, and landscaping to be "political issues" suitable for inclusion in his party's campaign platform. Rather, these constituted routine matters of day-to-day work, which he deemed unworthy of comment. Instead, he stated that the campaign was about "making all citizens of Yerevan feel equal, and creating a climate of fairness." He did not elaborate on what this would mean in practice.

¶3. (C) Secondly, at several points in the conversation he tacitly betrayed that he has no real expectation of actually becoming mayor. At one point, for example, he mentioned his firm plans to attend an international healthcare conference in New York in July, but then hastily corrected himself to say he would attend only if was not elected mayor. When asked how elections would turn out, he failed to predict a victory for Prosperous Armenia. Later that evening at a reception hosted by the Ambassador, Kushkian took pains to stress his intentions of winning the election, blaming any misunderstanding on innocent translation mistakes.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador and Kushkian both lamented the recent spate of violence that has already marred the campaign. The Ambassador noted reports that several opposition activists distributing leaflets had been assaulted by youths in the Yerevan district of Avan. Kushkian professed ignorance of

the events, but declared they were shameful if true. He added that his own party had not experienced any such incidents, at which point the Ambassador raised the recent reported melee between young RPA and PA supporters on May 12.

Kushkian acknowledged that unfortunately both parties have attracted some ardent and occasionally overzealous young supporters who have not yet learned the proper boundaries of political discourse, and such incidents were regrettable. He emphasized that PA and RPA continue to work together quite well in government, and said that no hard feelings exist between the parties. He said the ruling coalition partners had made a mature political decision to run separate races in order for each to measure its respective level of public support. (COMMENT: The May 2007 parliamentary election period -- and especially Election Day itself -- featured a number of brawls between rival goon squads of the RPA and PA as the two sharply contested for dominance in various regions, but most of this was hushed up by authorities and the parties' leaders. END COMMENT)

ORINATS YERKIR  
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15. (C) Rule of Law (Orinats Yerkir) candidate and parliamentary faction leader Heghine Bisharian told Ambassador on May 15 that her polling shows her in third place in the crowded field and her popularity steadily growing, especially as her media exposure increases. Bisharian acknowledged that OY's entering the ruling coalition immediately after last year's disputed presidential election had hurt the party's popularity, as it endured considerable criticism by the LTP-led opposition which said OY shared responsibility for the March 1 events. (Note: Before the election, OY leader and presidential candidate Arthur Baghdassarian strongly denounced Serzh Sargsian before

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abruptly accepting Sargsian's offer to join the coalition. Many in the opposition feel Baghdassarian and OY betrayed them, as this defection took considerable wind out of the opposition's sails and may have given the GOAM cover to break up the opposition demonstrations early in the morning on March 1. End Note). However, Bisharian asserted that during the past year the party has shown some impressive achievements, and that people are seeing that Arthur Baghdassarian and his party are keeping their promises.

16. (C) Bisharian said OY has an ambitious platform for Yerevan, and argued that a woman at the head of the party list is an asset, not a liability. She claims to have a good record in public office and has not been part of official corruption. The party platform calls for improved services, including better snow removal (always rather spotty) and street repair (potholes are a recurring problem). Her priorities include a Yerevan without poverty, re-opening dozens of firms that have closed due to the economic slowdown, more balanced development that focuses on more than just downtown, and more reliable tracking of building maintenance. She said OY would also make environmental issues a serious priority, noting that Armenia currently has serious environmental problems.

17. (C) Bisharian has engaged in a variety of campaign events, from small meetings to large rallies; she claimed to prefer small rallies where she has a better opportunity to explain her positions. She has also made several television appearances, and asserts that OY's popularity increases with every broadcast. She noted that every time Arthur Baghdassarian appears on television, it also helps the party; despite the criticism he has received for joining the ruling coalition, she claims he remains popular with voters.

18. (C) Asked why the ruling coalition (Republican, Orinats Yerkir, Prosperous Armenia) chose to run separate campaigns instead of uniting behind a single coalition candidate, Bisharian replied that while the parties discussed putting

forward a coalition candidate, they ultimately opted to run separately in part because a joint run would have led each party to claim they contributed a larger share of the votes. Running separately will allow each party to gauge its popularity with voters, Bisharian said.

COMMENT

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19. (C) It is common for Armenian politicians to keep their political conversation on a rarified -- and ultimately empty -- plane of abstract theory and regional geopolitics. Kushkian's disregard of pressing local issues is more the norm than the exception for leading politicians. In this regard, Bisharian's roll-up-the-sleeves approach is refreshing, although she may have a credibility problem given her party's record of flip-flopping on campaign promises. While we believe Kushkian and Bisharian's claims about wanting to gauge their own parties, popularity by running separate candidates for mayor, that is probably not the whole story. OY and PA may be working with the ruling Republican party to siphon votes from actual opposition parties, in particular the Armenian National Congress led by former President Levon Ter-Petrossian. End Comment.  
YOVANOVITCH